

## **ATTRIBUTIONAL MODEL OF VISITORS' EVENT EXPERIENCE IN FESTIVALS AND SPECIAL EVENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Attribution theory is a constructive and effective application in understanding the behavioural psychology of consumers. Psychologically, individuals normally make some kind of inference from their personal analysis of behavioural facts and figures encountered on-site in order to explain an event or outcome. Subsequently, causal inferences influence individuals' actions regardless of accuracy, quick form or biased attributions. This paper proposes an attributional model of visitors' event experience in an attempt to search for an understanding of how people explain and account for causality of outcomes. This model provides an understanding of causal attributions of visitors' event experience and its consequences within special event settings. According to Attribution theory, the many causal attributions may be aggregated into two dimensions (internal and external) to allow greater understanding and generalisation. Hence, it is proposed that event visitors assign causality (blame or credit) of their event experience based on event features provided by event managers as well as, external factors and social interactions with various people on-site.

### **KEY WORDS**

Attribution; Locus of causality; Event experience

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Fritz Heider (1958) first introduced the logic of attribution in 'The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations'. According to Heider, everyone tends to act as amateur psychologists to make sense of our world. Psychologically, we always try to understand causes of actions, events and/or outcome of human behaviour. Simply, we often search for answers to 'why we do what we do?' Thus, we observe and analyse one's own and other people's behaviour, and develop explanations for the behaviour. The explanations are termed attributions and the theory that describes the process is called attribution theory (Brehm & Kassir, 1996). Much of Heider's initial ideas have

been expanded in some way since it was introduced in 1958. Indeed, his theory of naïve psychology was considered as the major basic or classic attribution theory. It has become the source of reference for contemporary attribution theory developments and is widely used in a field of psychology and social psychology phenomena. In addition, the theory also offers theoretical guidance and explanations for studies in applied fields of psychology such as marketing and consumer behaviour.

There are so many different kinds of causal inferences that a person can make in order to explain a certain outcome of human behaviour (Brehm & Kassin, 1996). Heider suggested that it would be very useful to put together these explanations into two generic categories namely, internal attribution and external or situational/environmental attribution. Basically, an individual can make two types of attributions or explanations to explain causes of an event. Internal attribution refers to something about the person, or in this case about the event and organisation personally causes the event. The second attribution is termed external attribution, which means causes of the event are perceived as originating from the environment. Hence, an event or outcome is a function of both internal and external/environmental components. In brief, the many causal attributions perceived by customers could be aggregated into two dimensions to allow greater understanding and generalization (Cort, Griffith, & White, 2007).

Moreover, attribution theory focuses on an individual's subjective perceptions of causality of success/failure and their direct and indirect influences on consequent behaviours (Cort et al., 2007). Hence, according to the theory, the causality or reasons perceived by the individuals are one's true interest. The perceptions of the causes of the event do not necessarily need be the true causal factors. Attribution theory assumes that individuals make up their judgments and conclusions based on "objective reading of behavioural facts and figures" (Brehm & Kassin, 1996). Most times however, one's ability to process all relevant information via observation are limited, and often done without much effort and time to think of it thoroughly (Brehm & Kassin, 1996). Consequently, short cuts and/or biased attributions are made inaccurately to explain the events under consideration. To illustrate, basing on just a brief sample of behaviour, one can already form quick but inaccurate impressions of a product/service or a service provider. Yet, regardless of accuracy, the theory suggests that the perceived causality influences individuals' following actions because they feel confident that their causal inferences are accurate (Folkes, 1984; 1988).

To date, empirical attempts to employ attribution theory in consumer research were found to be unsatisfactory. It is found to be lacking in the field of tourism and recreation. Numerous studies on attributional principles of consumers were published in psychology journals but not in consumer behaviour publications (Folkes, 1988) especially in consumer research of tourism and recreational fields. Nevertheless, Folkes (1988) maintains attribution theory is a rich approach that is able to explain a wide series of consumer behaviour issues. Likewise, Weiner (2000) insisted the usefulness of attribution theory to be applied on a range of consumer studies, especially in predicting the likelihood of a successful product and subsequent consumer-related behaviour. The theory has been proven to be very useful especially in explaining consumers' post purchase behaviour (Erevelles, Srinivasan & Rangel, 2003). Similarly, Laufer (2002) stated attributions have significant influence on complaint cases, redress seeking, WOM activity, expectations of change, satisfaction and future intentions. Basically, customers first evaluate

their consumption outcome and then question the cause of the outcome prior to making their next choice of action (Weiner, 2000). Folkes (1984) maintained that the judgment of product outcome whether a product fails (or is successful) does not determine how customers will respond. It is actually the causal inferences of the reasons the product failed (or was successful) that actually influence the customers' response (Folkes, 1984).

Similar to any other tourism products, festivals and special events depend upon their success outcome and subsequent consumer-related behaviour for their continued staging while sustaining financial and non-financial supports, consumer loyalty and positive reputation. Today, festivals and special events produce significant business for the retail and tourism industries (Lee, Lee, Lee, & Babin, 2008). The substantial increment in the number and types of events being produced all over the world clearly indicates that they are operating in an exceedingly competitive market (Hede, Jago & Deery, 2002). Though conventionally festivals and special events are operated at a small scale and appeal only to the local or regional level, collectively they can be a very attractive and an increasingly important section of tourism (Getz & Frisby, 1988). In general, the unique appeal of the event, namely its atmosphere of fun and celebration, and its unusual ambiance differ from everyday experience and are able to catch the attention of numerous types of visitors (Hong, 2003). Thus, festivals and special events are increasingly regarded as tourist attractions that potentially bring about advantageous impacts to the host community.

Unlike most other tourism products and services, an event experience actually experienced by the event visitors does not necessarily shape only by what are provided (i.e. activities, setting, and entertainment) by the event managers. Most celebrations at events often combine various elements such as food, drink and music to initiate a "festive" or playful event consumption environment (Lee et al., 2007). Getz (1997) noted that total enjoyment and satisfaction perceived by the visitors are affected not only by the program, setting and management system designed by the event managers, but also the behaviours and complex interactions between visitors and staff, volunteers, performers, and other visitors. Visitors' experiences of an event can be described as an overall outcome formation that combines all various elements either individually or collectively experienced by a visitor (Berridge, 2007). It is suggested that the idea of the attribution theory is a simple but very constructive and effective application for explaining an outcome of event namely visitor event experience.

Thus, the objective of this paper is to propose an attributional model of visitor event experience that can help to explain and examine the outcome created by festivals and special events from the perception of the visitors. According to attribution theory, a visitor of a festival or special event tries to look for reasons that explain their enjoyment (or displeasure) of the event. The model also asserts that a visitor could attribute his or her experience to internal factors of the event such as products and services staged by the organizing group, or to external or situational factors that are not managed and controlled by the organizer, or to some combination of these factors.

#### **ATTRIBUTIONAL MODEL OF VISITOR EVENT EXPERIENCE**

The field of attribution research may provide a potentially valuable analytical paradigm for understanding how event visitors explain why a particular event or outcome has occurred and

the consequences of the perceived causes. According to Weiner (2000), attribution theory covers how both issues of cognition and emotion influence consumers' behaviour. When a consumer makes a judgment on product performance mostly likely, they would form product attributions (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007). In brief, attribution theory is about explanations about why a particular event or outcome has occurred; why the event has met the visitor's experiential needs, or why the experience at the event is to one's liking.

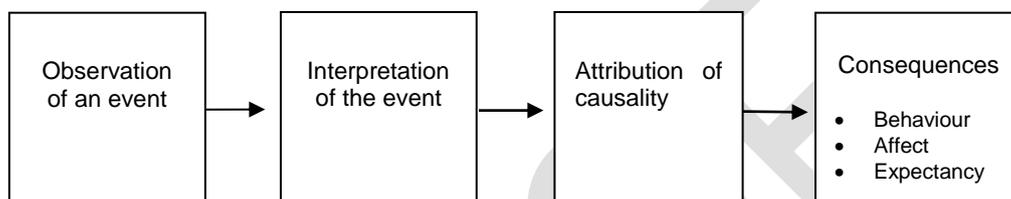
Heider viewed people as "naïve psychologists" in their attempts to account for and make sense of their large social worlds (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). Heider (1958) posited that people normally make some kind of inference from either the person or the environment in order to explain an event or outcome. Similarly, Brehm and Kassin (1996) stated the causal inferences perceived by visitors are most likely made from their personal analysis of behavioural facts and figures encountered on-site. Causal analysis of attribution theories do not necessarily deal with a true cause of an event (less regard on accuracy, and most likely quick form and biased attributions), but rather with what a visitor interprets the cause to be (Heider, 1958; Brehm & Kassin, 1996; Cort et al., 2007). Most times, visitors' ability to process all relevant information via observation on-site are limited, and often done without much effort and time to think of it thoroughly (Brehm & Kassin, 1996). Consequently, short cuts and/or biased attributions are made inaccurately to explain the events under consideration. Regardless of accuracy, the theory suggests that the perceived causality influences individuals' following actions because they feel confident that their causal inferences are accurate. In brief, this model is basically the search for an understanding of how people explain and account for causality.

Knowing the underlying causes perceived by visitors is very important for the event managers to be able to understand and predict the environment accurately, make valuable decisions and thus possibly control behaviour and events (Mizerski, Golden, & Kernan, 1979). Figure 1 illustrates the basic structure of attributional theories adapted from Smith and Martin (2007) and Kelley and Michela (1980). The attribution sequence begins with a visitor observing an event. The observation may involve the visitor directly in a 'real life' situation or indirectly such as hearing about something or even imagining it (Smith & Martin, 2007). Furthermore, the visitor would actively interpret the event or outcome by interjecting personal views, motivation, expectations, values, and past experiences in the effort to understand the event and thus assign causality. This would result to the consequences of the causal attribution that exert on visitors' behaviours, feelings, expectations, and intentions (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Most importantly, Folkes (1984) maintained that the judgment of product outcome whether a product failed (or succeeded) does not determine how customers will respond. It is actually the causal inferences of the reasons the product failed (or succeeded) that actually influence the customers' response (Folkes, 1984).

Essentially, this research expands the idea of attributional theories (Kelley & Michela, 1980; Folkes, 1988) investigating perceived causes made by the event visitors and measuring their effects, which afterwards affect visitors' post-consumption variables, visitor satisfaction and future intentions. Cort et al. (2007) and Smith and Martin (2007) suggested that if the event managers uncover the causal attributions made by the visitors and also the underlying causes of the attributions which in turn would aid the event managers in understanding and predicting the visitors' dealings and reactions towards the consequences accurately and possibly controlling the visitors, the event and/or the locus of causality. It is important to note that the model brings

together the link between the evaluation of causal factors perceived by the event visitors ultimately sets forth the main consequence variable, the visitor event experience that in turn affects the well-known post-consumption consequences, the visitors' satisfaction and their future intentions. Furthermore, adding the post-consumption variables (satisfaction and future intentions) could be very useful for the researcher to test the degree to which the structural relationships among the variables are consistent with other studies.

**Figure 1**  
Basic structure of attributional theories  
(Adapted from Smith and Martin (2007), and Kelley and Michela (1980).

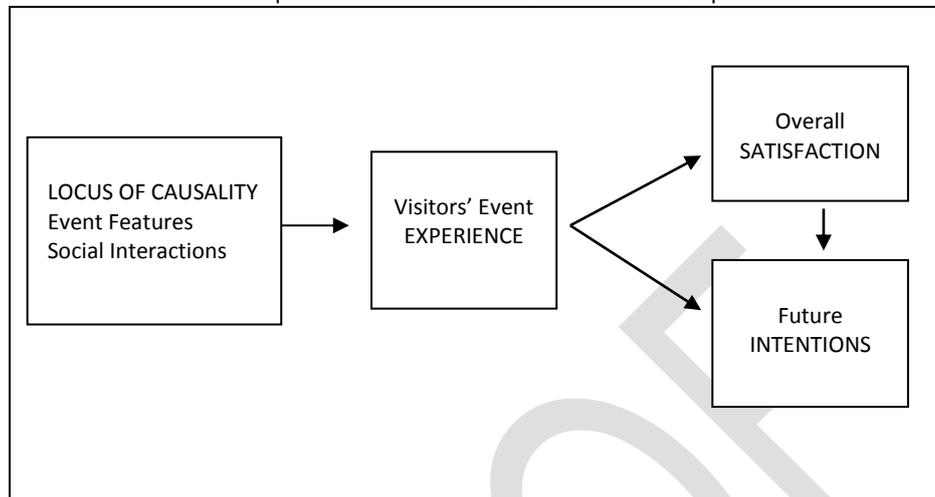


In addition, attribution theory rationalises the basic dimensions of causality that people use to understand and explain causes of events, which are internal attributions and external attributions. Schiffman and Kanuk (2007) suggested possible causality of product attributions attributed by consumers to the product itself, the consumers themselves, other people or situations, or some combinations of these factors. Hence in the effort to understand and predict the evaluation of event experience, this paper proposes that event visitors would perceive why a special event meets or does not meet their expectations due to the event products and services provided by the event managers (henceforth assumes to be internal attribution of the event), to social interactions with other people encountered on-site (external attribution), or to some combinations of these factors (Figure 2). Moreover, the causal inferences made by the visitors are suggested to influence their direct psychological consequences, which are the visitor event experience, which later affects visitors' overall satisfaction and future intentions of the event.

#### **Internal Attribution - Event Features**

The first locus of causality is event features, which refer to product attributes of festival and special events, which are primarily provided and controlled by event managers. In this model, event features are viewed as an internal attribution of the event experience essentially from the perspective of the event manager. Generally, evaluating products quality or performance of an event has been the highest priority for all event managers. Most of event attendees would attribute their satisfaction to the event products and services that they have consumed and encountered on-site of an event. Many studies have demonstrated that performance or quality of product features influence customer satisfaction. Baker and Crompton (2000), and Cole and Crompton (2003) stated that the quality of the tourism resources shapes the sum benefit and satisfaction the tourists receive. Thus, satisfaction substantially depends on how well the visitors respond to the festival's attributes (Cole & Crompton, 2003). Product features are the key component of event evaluation in order to assess outcomes of events. Thus, present research maintains the event's range of product features supplied and staged by the event managers as an important functional dimension of the event that influence visitors' judgment.

**Figure 2**  
Proposed attributional model of visitor event experience



#### External Attribution - Social Interactions

The second locus of causality is social interactions, which refer to “particular forms of externalities, in which the actions of a reference group affect an individual’s preferences” (Scheinkman, 2008, pp.1). Examples of reference groups on-site are event staff, volunteers, exhibitors, vendors/salespeople, entertainers/performers and fellow event attendees. The particular interest of this study is where one person’s action or behaviour influences a visitor’s action or behaviour in contrast to ‘individual’ and individualistic theories of consumption. This variable is considered as an environmental or situational factor, specifically a social dimension with various people encountered at events. According to attribution theory, people attempt to try to make sense of the world or outcome of an event by considering others’ actions to infer causation and disposition (Mizerski et al., 1979). Most significant in social occurrences such as special events, the visitors might infer causation from their interactions and encounters with others (i.e. event staff, volunteers, exhibitors, vendors/salespeople, entertainers/performers, and fellow event attendees). Many service marketing scholars (Grove & Fiske, 1997; Martin, 1996; Martin & Pranter, 1989) propose that other people encountered on site may significantly influence a visitor’s overall judgment. Interestingly, Crompton and Love (1995), and Baker and Crompton (2000) implied the relevancy of the social factor in influencing visitor assessment within the context of a festival.

Nonetheless, the matter of social interactions has been somewhat overlooked in both event and tourism studies. This has been supported by Swan and Bowers (1998) that most consumer behaviour models treat consumers as isolated individuals without considering other consumers’ impacts. Grove and Fiske (1997) have noted that the influence of socialisation with other than the employees is practically being disregarded by many companies. Yet, in actual fact, people may affect one another directly by having interpersonal encounters, or may even indirectly affect each other just by being part of the same service environment (Bitner, 1992). As suggested by Petkus (2002), every action made plays a part in the final market offering of

experience to the customers.

In present research, the influence of various groups of providers such as event organizing staff, vendors/salespeople, entertainers/performers, and fellow event attendees is thought to be critical to be considered mainly because socializing is the key activity of any celebration. The impact of social interactions that a visitor might have with others on-site has hardly been examined exclusively as a serious factor in most event evaluations. The majority of past evaluations have merely included questions related to event staff as part of the product/service performance or quality survey. In other words, previous studies rarely consider influences of other types of service providers (i.e. volunteers, exhibitors, vendors/salespeople and entertainers/performers) available on-site. Yet often, visitors meet and interact with people other than the organizer's own staff such as salespeople and hawkers at stalls, sponsors, artists, performers, and the event volunteers. As stated by Hamilton, Crompton and More (1991), the event manager and staff tend to primarily maintain or improve the quality of event products and services, rather than be involved directly with the visitors. Wangenheim, Evanschitzky and Wunderlich (2007) suggested that all employee groups, not just those that have direct interaction with customers, have significant effects on customer's judgment.

Moreover, it is also important to consider the influence of interpersonal encounters among customers on visitors' judgement (Martin & Pranter, 1989). According to Grove and Fiske (1997), experiences at any forms of tourist attractions (e.g. amusement parks, museums, historical sites, etc.) would involve some amount of sharing of space and time with other visitors. Hence, it is beneficial for event managers to manage their customer-to-customer interactions in order to enhance customer satisfaction at events (Wu, 2007). Though the influence of interactions with other than the employees is generally being disregarded in instrument of consumer behaviour such as service quality and customer satisfaction. Still, the authors believe that social interactions between visitors and others on-site of event are an important factor to be considered in the evaluation of visitor event experience. Hence, the present model posits that social interactions have a significant influence on visitors' event experience.

#### **CONSEQUENCES: VISITOR EVENT EXPERIENCE AND POST-CONSUMPTION VARIABLES**

This paper builds an event experiential concept based on the experiential paradigm by Pine and Gilmore (1998). Reviews of applications of the experiential concept especially in the context of hedonic products much like festivals and special events were very encouraging. Visitors' event experience is viewed as a base experiential model engaging event visitors on-site that might involve a mix of complicated dimensions in the staging the event. Hence for the purpose of this model, the variable visitor event experience would be viewed as "the total immersive outcome that combines all the various elements that are experienced, as individuals and as a collective" (Berridge, 2007, pp.169). The visitor event experience is expectedly rich with sensations and full of emotions. Thus, the variable would offer the visitor personalised special experiences and unforgettable memories to meet today's consumer demand (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Oh, Fiore and Jeoung (2007) stated that the primary focus of memorable experiences is the distinct advantage of the experiential paradigm over other similar existing models, such as customer satisfaction and service quality.

This suggests that the visitors' event experience takes on the role as a mediator that mediates between the causal attributions (event features and social interactions) and post-consumption variables (overall satisfaction and future intentions). First, attribution theory has suggested that a consequence of a visitors' causal attributions (event features and social interactions) is their individual psychological state (Weiner, 2000), in this case the visitor's perception of the event experience. Jeong, Fiore, Niehm and Lorenz (2009) have reported that online product presentation features on an apparel web site were positively affecting the experiences realms. Next, attribution theory maintains that if the event managers get to uncover the causal attributions made by the visitors, in turn the underlying causes would aid the event managers in understanding and controlling the visitors' dealings and reactions towards their individual consequences.

Oh et al. (2007) has established that experiences have implications for customer satisfaction among other variables, arousal, memories and overall quality. Thus, they suggested that further research on the relationship of the experience with customer satisfaction be a valuable contribution to the tourism literature. In addition, attribution studies have also revealed that attributions have a significant influence on behavioural consequences for example, cases of complaints, WOM activity, expectations of change, and future intentions. In the case of this study, visitors' future intentions would relate to their intentions to recommend the event visited to other people and also their intentions to re-visit the event in the future.

Indeed, a complete understanding of visitors' experiences at events could not be essentially achieved without studying its connection to post-consumption evaluations, overall satisfaction and future intentions. There are many reviews on customer satisfaction as a post-consumption evaluation. Many studies agree that post-consumption variables such as customer satisfaction and future intentions are related to business success. Tourism studies including Pizam and Ellis (1999) continuously described satisfaction as the end state of fulfilment resulting from the experience of consumption. Oh et al. (2007) has established that the experience realms have implications for satisfaction. In this framework, visitors' overall satisfaction is defined as a collective psychological state that takes place immediately after consumption experience (Oliver, 1997). Oh (1999) has implied that satisfaction can offer event managers a summary of rational and emotional assessments of the visitor event experience. Hence, Oh et al. (2007) suggested the idea that the experience realms have an effect on customer satisfaction.

Furthermore, numerous studies agreed that the construct of customer satisfaction is important in theory and also in practice mainly because of its relationship to desirable future behavioural outcomes - generally intentions to repurchase and to recommend. González, Comesaña and Brea (2007) stated that future behavioural intentions that have been confirmed as consequences of high customer satisfaction include clear indication that the consumer will continue with the firm, making favourable comments about the firm, recommending the firm, or remaining loyal to the company. Baker and Crompton (2000) reported that visitor satisfaction in context of special events directly influence behavioural intentions.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This paper considers attribution theory as a useful underpinning theory to model experiential causal factors and outcomes within festival and special event settings. Attribution theory

focuses on explaining why a certain event, or state, or outcome has come about and consequences of the causal inferences. Hence, the paper proposes that an attributional model of visitor's event experience can be used to explain and examine the outcome created by event experience. The model focuses on an individual's subjective perceptions of causality of success/failure and their direct and indirect influences on consequent behaviours. In addition, the causal inferences perceived by the visitors are from visitors' personal analysis of behavioural facts and figures encountered onsite of a festival or event.

Furthermore, the attributional model of visitor event experience posits that the causality or reasons perceived by the individuals are of true interest. The perceptions of the causes of the event do not necessarily need to be the true causal factors. Based on just a brief sample of a situation or behaviour, a visitor can already form a quick but inaccurate impression of a product/service or a service provider. Moreover, this model attempts to add to a body of knowledge by introducing antecedents of the event outcome experienced by visitors. Attribution theory rationalises the basic properties of causes as internal and external attributions. It is suggested in this model that an event visitor would assign causality (blame or credit) to the outcome of the event on the basis of event products and services provided by the event managers (henceforth assumes to be internal attribution of the event from the perspective of the event manager) or the social interactions with various people the visitors meet on-site of event (henceforth assumes to be external attribution or situational factors to the event from perspective of the event manager), or to some combination of these factors. Subsequently, causal inferences made by event visitors would in turn influence their responses, or in this case their perceptions on the event experience, overall satisfaction and future intentions.

Results from this study help both researchers and event managers toward better understanding and resolved uncertainty on the concept of event experience and its strategies toward ensuring success and sustaining future growth of their events. Moreover, the present study stresses the importance of event managers to not only focus on their products and services when staging an event experience but to also consider other external variables which could still be important factors (i.e. social relationship between visitors and providers). In short, it is suggested that attribution theory is able to provide a new foundation to better understand the event visitors' thinking and perceptions regarding causal factors of visitor event experience, satisfaction and future plan toward a certain event.

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